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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1664
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) Chairman expressed concern to the Ambassador about voter education in the run-up to the referendum on Thailand's next constitution. In a courtesy call on the Ambassador after attending an Embassy-organized digital video conference with an American expert on referenda, the Chairman discussed efforts to explain the relevant issues to the public. The ECT appears concerned about a possible boycott or disruption of the referendum. The ECT also appears unlikely to begin planning (even on a contingency basis) for the legislative election prior to the constitution's promulgation and the passage of enabling legislation. The Ambassador offered to assist the ECT in any way possible. End Summary.

12. (C) Apichart Sukhagganond, the Chairman of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), told the Ambassador that he worried it would be difficult to ensure the Thai population was well informed in the run-up to the eventual constitutional referendum. Both he and ECT Secretary General Suthiphon Thaveechaiyagarn stressed they would have to explain to the electorate the consequences of "yes" or "no" votes when the draft constitution is complete and submitted to the public for approval. (Note: The interim constitution provides that, if the population does not approve the constitution in the referendum, the Council for National Security (CNS) and the administration shall have 30 days to revise a previous Thai constitution of their choosing and present it to the King for promulgation. End Note.)

13. (C) The Ambassador expressed concern that political figures opposed to the coup might try to generate opposition to the draft constitution, whatever its provisions, simply to register their displeasure with the current government. The government should make a concerted effort to explain the issues publicly. Suthiphon noted that the ECT already had some CNS publications on the political situation, but these would not be distributed to the grassroots level. The Ambassador observed that television, rather than written materials, provided the most effective medium for reaching the broad population. Apichart mentioned he had watched a live television interview with Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont on the evening of February 13, and he felt Surayud explained his policies capably.

14. (C) The Ambassador welcomed the participation of ECT officials (including Apichart and Suthiphon) in a just-concluded Embassy-hosted video conference between the ECT and a California-based academic with expertise on referenda. The Ambassador said he would be pleased to assist

the ECT in any other way possible. Apichart thanked the Ambassador for receiving him for this discussion. Suthiphon noted the Swiss Ambassador would participate in an ECT seminar on February 15; leading political party figures would also participate. In the afternoon of February 14, the ECT would meet with representatives of 44 Thai political parties.

15. (C) The video conference focused principally on technical issues, but ECT officials asked how they might deal with the possible impact of low voter turnout; from the context of the discussion, it appeared they worried sympathizers of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin might organize a boycott. They also asked their academic interlocutor about how best to impose criminal penalties on persons disrupting a referendum. (Comment: These questions indicate what strikes us as a reasonable concern that the referendum might not proceed smoothly. End Comment.)

16. (C) In a brief conversation after the call on the Ambassador, we asked the ECT officials whether they could begin planning for national legislative elections on a contingency basis once the provisions of the draft constitution become clear. They replied that they would have to hold off on all planning until after the referendum, and after the parliament passes enabling legislation (a revised Election Law and Election Commission Law). However, they assured us that they were currently organizing local elections throughout Thailand, and they felt confident they could proceed quickly with the national legislative elections once the legal framework was in place.

BOYCE